

IMPOSSIBLE TO ASSESS RACIAL IMBALANCE PLAN WITHOUT “OPEN CHOICE” COST INFORMATION

As part of the need to respond to the State’s request for revisions to Fairfield’s Racial Imbalance Plan, there will be a public hearing on this topic on Tuesday, March 14, beginning at 6:45 pm at BOE headquarters, 501 Kings Highway, 2nd Floor.

Fairfield Taxpayer fully respects the intent of the State law, but believes it is unfortunate that it is being rigidly applied to Fairfield’s McKinley School, where families are apparently so happy with the school itself, with its culture and with its performance, that none of them wants to leave.

The latest BOE plan to address this longstanding “problem” includes a proposal to increase the number of non-Fairfield students in our schools from 72 to 100 under what is called the “**Open Choice Program**,” in an effort to increase the overall percentage of minority students in all of our schools (currently 21%), and thereby reduce the extent to which the minority percentage at McKinley School (currently 48%) exceeds the regulatory (and arbitrary) maximum of 25 percentage-points (“pp”) – (48% minus 21% = 27 pp).

FT will analyze carefully all aspects of the BOE’s new Racial Imbalance Plan, but we cannot do so until Superintendent Jones provides the cost analysis of the Open Choice program that she recently promised to the Board of Finance. Although our BOE is under time pressure to respond the State Board of Education (SBOE), **Fairfield Taxpayer believes that the BOE should not approve any plan for which we do not have enough information to weigh the benefits against the costs – particularly at a time when the Town is under severe budget pressures due to the fiscal crisis in Hartford.**

Additional information about the Racial Imbalance issue is provided below, some of which has been excerpted from a helpful recent message from a member of the BOE.

- A state statute, enacted almost 50 years ago, requires that all schools in each level (elementary, middle, high) in each CT school district be in “balance” in terms of its racial makeup.
- “Balance” is defined as a school “minority percentage” that is no more than 25 pp greater than the district-wide minority percentage.
- Over the past ten years, Fairfield’s district-wide minority percentage has been approximately 17%-20%, and McKinley’s minority percentage has been 43%-49%. Accordingly, McKinley has been over the 25 pp threshold most of that time.
- The statute, which was designed to protect minority students from isolation and an inferior educational experience, only looks at the numbers, and the SBOE is required to follow the regulations, even in a case like McKinley, where families are apparently very happy with their school.
- Since 2007, the BOE has tried, in the most cost-effective and least invasive ways, to reduce McKinley’s minority percentage gap below 25 pp, including allowing all students complete freedom to opt in or opt out, but these efforts have not been successful.
- Accordingly, the SBOE requested revisions to Fairfield’s plan and our BOE approved two changes: (a) moving the Dwight preschool to Stratfield in the hope that more McKinley minority students would choose to move to that school; and (b) increasing the number of Open Choice students in other schools in the hope that the district’s overall minority percentage would rise.
- Fairfield is paid only \$3,000 per year for each Open Choice student who chooses to attend our schools, and given the State’s fiscal problems, that amount might be reduced.

- The BOE also said it would consider some sort of magnet program at McKinley that might attract more non-minority students, and agreed to consider the option of redistricting once the planned expansions/renovations at Holland Hill and Mill Hill have taken place – either a “mini” redistricting that would impact only a few elementary schools, or a full elementary school redistricting that might also impact middle and high school students, depending on how the “feeder plans” from ES to MS to HS are impacted.
- It appears likely that some form of redistricting will eventually be required.
- After ten years, the SBOE was concerned that the new plan would still not solve the problem, and asked for more specific timelines and information on Fairfield’s plan.
- After the public hearing on Tuesday night, the BOE will be reviewing additional information regarding the plan, vote on it in April, and then submit it to the SBOE.

Links to relevant documents:

<http://fairfieldschools.org/board-of-education/racial-imbalance-plan/>

<http://www.ces.k12.ct.us/page.cfm?p=3411>